

## Foundations

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## Foundations

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### Summary

Nothing crumbles all at once. Loki, and five times the cracks showed.

## Chapter 1

“Do it now,” Thor whispered. “C’mon, quick!”

From behind the column they were using to hide, Loki wrinkled his nose, scrunched his forehead in concentration, and held his hands out towards the Einherjar standing guard in the corridor, curling his fingers as he cast the spell.

Nothing happened.

Thor thwacked him with the back of his hand. “You said you could make him fall asleep!”

“I said I could *maybe* make him fall asleep,” Loki hissed back. “Mum just taught me, and for your information she had me practice on *crickets*.”

“Why would you need to put crickets to sleep?”

“I don’t, but what do you think she’s going to do, let me practice on you?”

At this, Thor looked intrigued. “I wouldn’t mind, sounds fun.”

Loki snickered at the image, but then he shook himself. There wasn’t such a big difference between crickets and Einherjar, was there? Okay, well, maybe there was. But he was pretty sure he just needed to make the spell bigger. Which Mum *hadn’t* taught him, but somehow he intuitively knew how to do it.

At least, he’d thought he’d known how to do it. He closed his eyes and drew in several deep breaths. When Mum had started teaching Loki her magic several years earlier, Thor had laughed. “Magic is for girls,” he’d said. Loki had waited until he knew enough to get his revenge. Eventually, he’d transformed himself into a snake to trick Thor into picking him up. Thor *loved* snakes. Once he did, Loki had transformed back and stuck a dagger that he’d nicked from their parents’ chambers in Thor’s shoulder.

Thor had howled, Loki had gotten in trouble, and as Father had closed the door to his rooms and told him he’d stay there without dinner until he’d thought about what he’d done, Loki had crossed his arms over his chest and decided next time he’d transform the dagger into something else so he wouldn’t get caught with it.

Honestly, he hadn’t even done a very good job with the transformation. Thor should have known it wasn’t a real snake.

“Loki,” Thor whispered. “What are you doing?”

Opening his eyes, Loki turned to Thor and said, “Thinking.”

“If you can’t do it, we’ll do Get Help.”

“I don’t *want* to do Get Help.”

At that moment, the guard’s head swiveled and he looked straight at them. They ducked behind the column, but it was no good. His armor clanked as he took a step towards them and said, “What are you boys doing?”

“*Loki*,” Thor said, “do it!”

Something locked into place in Loki's mind at last, like two puzzle pieces fitting together, and he stepped out from behind the column. This had better work, or he was really going to get in trouble. He flicked his fingers, biting down and clenching his teeth at the same time.

The Einherjar dropped like a stone, his armor rattling and his spear hitting the ground with a loud, ringing clang.

Thor poked his head around the column and the two of them stood still for a moment, staring. Loki tasted blood and realized he must have bitten his tongue. "Did you kill him?" Thor asked in a hushed voice.

"No," Loki said with a lot more confidence than he felt.

They crept closer and Loki hesitantly knelt down to see if the guard was still alive. If he'd been locked in his rooms all afternoon and evening for stabbing Thor—and it wasn't even that bad of a stabbing—then he'd be in *really* big trouble for killing an Einherjar.

For a second, his heart felt like it stopped in his chest. Was the guard breathing? He didn't look like he was breathing, he—

But then the guard let out a snore that was so loud that Loki jumped back, startled. Thor laughed, but Loki could tell it was mostly out of relief. The two of them stood there for a second longer. Loki was so surprised that this plan was actually working that he nearly forgot what they were doing.

"Okay, let's go, before he wakes up," Thor said.

Loki grinned at his brother and the two of them darted down the hallway towards their parents' chambers. "Are you sure they're busy now?" Loki asked as Thor pushed the door open. This whole thing had been Thor's idea. And it wasn't that Loki didn't trust his brother, but when it came to planning things, Loki was definitely better at it. He *planned*. Thor didn't.

"They were walking in the gardens," Thor said. "It's fine." Loki hesitated, but Thor looked so confident that it was impossible not to trust him.

They slipped inside and quietly shut the door behind them, padding through the sitting room with its huge fireplace to the bedroom. Their parents' huge bed, piled with furs, was in front of them, and there, next to it, was what they'd come for. Loki and Thor looked at each other in barely contained glee and crossed the room to stand in front of their father's spear.

Gungnir. In the frescoes on the ceiling of the throne room, Father was holding it. It was the weapon he used in battle. When he sat on his huge throne, it was always there in his hand. Loki didn't know the extent of its powers, but he knew with absolute certainty that it was the most powerful weapon in the whole universe. It would have to be, since Father was the most powerful person in the whole universe.

For a minute, they just stared at it, glancing at each other every so often. Now that they were standing there, Loki found that he was too scared to actually hold the spear. It seemed bigger than it did when Father held it.

Then, Thor reached out and wrapped his fingers around it, grunting as he lifted it. "Is it heavy?" Loki asked.

"Yeah," Thor said, his voice distracted as he struggled to keep the spear upright. It kept almost over-balancing in his hands, and finally he propped it on the floor to steady it.

Smirking, Loki said, “How are you going to fight with it if you can’t even hold it up?”

Thor made a face at him. With another grunt, he hefted it off the ground and grappled with it until he was holding it so it was pointing towards the wall. It still looked too big for Thor, but now that he was at least holding it straight, it was a little more impressive.

“Do something with it,” Loki said.

With a glance down at his hands, Thor asked, “Like what?”

“I don’t know, make it shoot lightning or something.” Feeling braver now that Thor had managed to pick the spear up without anything bad happening, he sidled closer and peered over his brother’s shoulder, reaching for it. “It has to do *something*.”

Jerking the spear away, Thor said, “Hey, I’m not done.”

“You’re not doing anything with it,” Loki pointed out, raising his eyebrows.

“Give me a second.” Thor studied it, then swung it towards the windows on the other side of the room, nearly losing his balance and toppling over. Striking a pose, he aimed it dramatically at the glass.

And nothing happened. Disappointed, Thor held it out to Loki. “Here. See if you can make it do something.”

The weight of Gungnir surprised Loki as Thor dropped it into his hands. His knees almost buckled before he caught himself and straightened up. Wrapping his fingers around it, he found himself staring at his hands, just as Thor had done. Father always said one of them would be king, and only one of them. This spear was a symbol of that kingship. Holding it felt...overwhelming. Suddenly, Loki wasn’t sure he *wanted* to be king. What was he supposed to do with this? If it was a weapon, he didn’t know how to use it. What would he do if he was king? If he was in charge of Asgard? Not just Asgard, but all of the Nine Realms? He just liked doing what he wanted to do and playing. And it didn’t seem like you could do what you wanted when you were king, despite what Thor seemed to think. It seemed like a lot of work and responsibility, and he hadn’t thought about it that way at all until he’d felt how heavy the spear was.

“Are you trying?” Thor asked.

Loki looked up at him. “What? Oh—no. Maybe there’s a spell or something.”

“Father doesn’t cast spells,” Thor said dismissively. When Loki looked at him meaningfully, lifting one hand off Gungnir to waggle his fingers at Thor, his brother hastily added, “Not that there’s anything wrong with casting spells.”

Hefting the spear higher, Loki aimed it straight at the middle of the window and concentrated, trying to imagine energy surging through the spear. For about five seconds, he poured every ounce of his concentration into it, but nothing happened.

With a disappointed look at Thor, Loki opened his mouth to say they should probably go. But at that moment, the door banged open.

Both of them whirled around, Loki accidentally cracking Thor across the stomach with Gungnir. Father was standing in the doorway, looking dark and towering with rage. Loki’s stomach shriveled to a small, hard pit.

“Put it down, *now!*” Odin commanded. In fright, Loki dropped the spear. The ringing clang of it hitting the ground seemed horribly loud. Odin marched into the room and scooped it up effortlessly, his jaw tight, before he planted it on the ground and faced them. “Why am I cursed with such disobedient sons?” he growled.

“We were just—” Thor began.

“Silence!” Odin barked at him. Thor’s mouth snapped shut. Their father tightened his grip around Gungnir. “Have none of my teachings meant anything to you, that you would show such disrespect? Do you think holding the throne, holding this spear, is a game?”

Loki swallowed. “No, Father, we—”

Odin turned a fierce glare on him and he stopped talking. “Your behavior isn’t befitting of the sons of a knave, let alone princes of Asgard. I’m ashamed of both of you. You would treat Gungnir as a toy when you *both* know better. But *you*, Loki.” His brow furrowed into angry crags and he grabbed Loki by the arm, pulling him out of the room into the hallway. Thor trailed behind them. As Father pushed Loki forward towards the still sleeping Einherjar, he demanded, “Is this how you plan to use your mother’s gifts? I agreed that she could teach you because she assured me you could be trusted with sorcery. This doesn’t look like the handiwork of a prince who’s worthy of learning an ancient craft. It looks like the handiwork of a child who doesn’t understand what he’s been taught.”

Through this, Loki’s breath had come faster and faster, but he was determined not to cry. But now, Father stopped talking and stared down at him, as though he was expecting something. Loki didn’t know *what* though.

“Father, it’s not his fault,” Thor said in a small voice from behind them. “I told Loki to make the guard fall asleep.”

Relief and affection for his brother surged through Loki, but Thor got nothing in return for his bravery but Odin growling, “Hold your tongue.” Father gestured to the guard. “You think you’re an adept enough sorcerer? Wake him up.”

“What?” Loki asked weakly. “I don’t know how.”

“You don’t know how to repair the damage you do with your foolishness, and yet you do it anyway.” Shaking his head, Odin said, “Your lessons with your mother are over.”

This sent a bolt of such gut-churning dismay through Loki that he forgot to be afraid of being yelled at, locked in his rooms, sent away to be eaten by Frost Giants, every terrible thing that flashed through his mind when Father was angry. “You can’t!” he said. “I like it, and I’m *good* at it, and—and—” And it was the one thing he *was* good at, the one thing that he was better than Thor, who Loki couldn’t help feeling was Father’s favorite and always had been. Maybe part of him had thought that if could be good at something too, something that was all his, then Father would love him just as much. And now it was being taken away from him.

The dismay tipped over into bitterness. It *had* been Thor’s idea. And now Loki was being punished for it.

“You’ve proven otherwise today,” Odin snapped. “Now go to your rooms, both of you.”

Loki’s eyes welled with tears and a lump rose in his throat, but he didn’t say anything else. On Odin’s other side, Thor opened his mouth and began, “Father—”

But Odin pointed at him and said, “Not another word. I don’t want either of you in my sight right now. Go.”

The two of them slunk away, slouch-shouldered, and didn’t speak as they trudged through the palace towards the hallway where both of their bed chambers were. Loki didn’t think he *could* speak. Father couldn’t stop his magic lessons. He just *couldn’t*.

When they reached their quarters, Loki didn’t look up. Eyes low, he closed his fingers around the doorknob to his chambers. Then fingers wrapped around his arm and he looked up, startled, to see Thor standing there, staring at him seriously. “Father didn’t mean that,” Thor said.

For a long moment, Loki stared at his brother, until finally, he said, “Yes he did.”

“Mother will still teach you—”

“That’s not what you said,” Loki interrupted bitterly. “He meant every word. Even if Mother changes his mind, he still meant it.” He swallowed hard. “You heard him. I’m not worthy.”

Before Thor could say anything else, Loki opened his door and slammed it shut, then locked it, and the other door that adjoined their quarters, for good measure. He thought Thor might knock on the door and try to get in. But his brother didn’t. There was only silence outside, and then, after a minute, the sound of Thor’s door clicking closed.

## Chapter 2

Glancing over at Thor, Loki stifled laughter and said, “You look ridiculous, you know that, don’t you, brother?”

“You said we should be unobtrusive if we ventured into the city. I’m wearing a disguise.”

“You’re wearing a shawl over your head that you stole from Mother. If anything, you’re *drawing* attention to yourself.”

Thor pulled the watered silk across his mouth and said, his voice muffled a little, “There. Now it’s covering my face.”

One of Loki’s eyebrows went up. “Oh, you’re unrecognizable now,” he said.

Thor let the shawl fall away. “You should be nicer—I said I’d accompany you on your little jaunt amongst the common folk.” He paused. “And I didn’t steal it, for your information, I’m just borrowing it.”

“As I recall,” Loki said, “you *asked* to accompany me.” He glanced at a market stall selling more types of pots and platters than he knew existed, and caught sight of his reflection in a particularly huge feasting cauldron. Smoothing his hair back, he added, “You’re welcome, by the way.” He’d eschewed his long-coat for a shorter jerkin and trousers, and a wool cloak covered his shoulders. No one who knew what the princes of Asgard looked like would be fooled by it, but at least people’s eyes slid over him a bit more without his normal gold and green.

There was no mistaking Thor, though. Somehow, even though they were almost the same height, his brother couldn’t help but dominate whatever space he was in. The beard he’d taken to wearing, now that he could actually grow one in properly, only seemed to accentuate it. Maybe exacerbate it was a better word. He’d filled out as he’d gotten taller, whereas Loki had just gotten weedy. Strong enough, but *normal* strong. Nothing like Thor’s physicality. Loki was used to being overshadowed by his louder, more boisterous, exuberant older brother, but as they transitioned from awkward teens into adulthood, there was an edge to it that he didn’t quite know how to handle.

“Well, can you blame me?” Thor said. “You’re always sneaking out into the city. I was bound to get curious.”

With a snort, Loki said, “It’s not sneaking, and I’d hardly call it ‘always.’”

“Brother, you’re very argumentative this evening.” Thor clapped a hand down on Loki’s shoulder. “Bring me to whatever alehouse you frequent and we’ll get drunk, what do you say?”

A smile twitched at Loki’s face, which he tried to keep down for a second before he lost the struggle. “C’mon,” he said, ducking down an alley at the side of the marketplace. Truth be told, he had a number of haunts in the city. In all of them, he was recognized, welcomed, and treated... well, he wasn’t naïve enough to think he was being treated like one of their own, but the other patrons were respectful without being obsequious. Bringing Thor might be a mistake, but his brother had seemed so excited at the possibility, and Loki didn’t like to disappoint him. Considering how often he felt like a disappointment to his family, this was an easy victory.

The two of them made their way through the city. Most passersby did a double-take—Thor was obviously fooling no one with his ‘disguise,’ but then again, together, it was hard to mistake the Princes of Asgard for anyone but themselves. People were used to seeing them together. The

inseparable Odinsons.

A few more turns down narrow side streets brought them to the pub he'd decided on, the very inaptly named Bifrost Inn, which was neither an inn nor anywhere near the Bifrost. As the two of them ducked through the door, heads turned. Loki smiled easily, recognizing several faces, and made his way to an open table near the back that a couple men were hastily vacating. Alright, so he was definitely treated a cut above the average Asgardian who walked through the door, but at least people were usually subtle about it.

As the two of them settled down at the table, the barman came over and said, "Evening, young prince. Brought a friend tonight, have we?"

"Hello, Birger," Loki said with a smile. "Just someone I met on the way. Two flagons of that ale you got in last week, if you don't mind?"

"Aye, there's still a couple kegs. I hope your *friend* enjoys it," Birger said with a wink.

Thor pulled their mother's scarf off his head and crumpled it in his lap, looking sheepish. "I'm surprised you don't use your tricks to disguise yourself," he said.

Raising an eyebrow, Loki replied, "Who says I don't?"

Thor chuckled. Their ales arrived at that moment and Loki raised his flagon to Birger in thanks. As the barman left, Thor leaned his arms on the table and said, "So this is it? You just sit here and drink?"

"I sit here," Loki corrected him. "I'm drinking with *you*."

"What's the point of being here if you're not going to drink?" Thor asked with a laugh. "You can sit just as well at home as you can here."

Shrugging, Loki said, "Change of scene." The truth was that at home, the watching had gotten dull long ago. Seeing the same people every day in the deeply controlled, structured environment of the palace didn't interest him. People behaved differently when the eyes of the royal family were on them, and they all suspected that Heimdall was watching them while they were at the palace, anyway. Out in the city, anonymity made them into themselves.

For good measure, he added, "I can drink at home too, if you want to get technical about it."

Thor drained his entire flagon in a few gulps and raised it above his head, but Loki flicked his fingers and it disappeared from his hands. At the nonplussed look his brother gave him, Loki grinned and said, "They might not let me come back if my 'friend' breaks all their drinkware."

"Hm, fair point, brother." Thor signaled to Birger, who brought another round for both of them.

Magicking the flagon away had been a mistake, Loki realized as he glanced around. Most of the other patrons hadn't noticed, but a couple men were staring at him. It was easy to forget that out here, sorcery wasn't looked upon kindly. Despite Thor's teasing, he didn't really have a problem, *per se*, with Loki's magic. It was obvious that he looked down on it, yes. But he didn't begrudge Loki for the ability. The same could not be said of the general Asgardian populace.

But Thor didn't notice, which wasn't a surprise. Loki loved his brother dearly, but he wasn't the most observant man on Asgard. It shouldn't matter, though—only a fool would make trouble for the princes. Thor, with his muscles and his formidable reputation in battle, was insurance against something ugly starting. Picking a fight with Loki was stupid. He could hold his own. Picking a



fight with Thor *and* Loki was suicide. So there was no need to worry.

And yet... As Loki drank his ale, he couldn't help noticing that the men were still staring. He was sure he'd seen them before, but they'd never seemed to take note of him previously. It was the sorcery. Usually he wasn't so careless.

Thor was three flagons in and looking noticeably more cheerful—not that he hadn't been already, but his grin was just a bit wider and his eyes, while not exactly unfocused, weren't quite as sharp as they'd been twenty minutes ago. Loki downed the rest of his ale and pushed the empty flagon aside, then pulled the second closer. Instead of drinking, though, he only wrapped his fingers around it and tried to keep an eye on his watchers without them noticing.

"You're not drinking, brother," Thor said, picking up Loki's flagon and pushing it towards him. Ale slopped over the rim and Loki grabbed the bottom before any more could spill.

Flashing a grin at Thor, Loki said, "In comparison to you, *most* people don't look like they're drinking. It's a challenge to keep up with you." But he couldn't stop himself from seeing it just a little bit as a contest, one which obviously Thor would win. Loki could at least give him some competition, though.

As the two of them worked their way through flagon after flagon of ale, Loki felt himself relaxing. A rare thing, if he was honest with himself. Thor teased him that he was too uptight and he always objected, but now, with the benefit of...oh, who knew how many drinks, he thought his brother might have a point. He *did* think a lot, lately about the future and his place in it. Thor's future, really, Asgard's future was Thor's future, because with each passing year it became more and more obvious that Loki would never be named heir to the throne. It was always going to have been Thor. Did that make sense? Probably not. Probably the ale talking. Normally it hurt, knowing that he'd never really had a chance. Not so much because he desperately wanted the throne. He didn't. It had been made clear to him long ago that he possessed nothing that Asgardians valued in their kings. He just wanted to *be* valued, even if it didn't translate into a crown.

But right now there was a distance from it. Hm. Maybe this was why people drank.

The men watching him didn't seem like a concern anymore, either. They were the princes of Asgard. Who would dare attack them?

"Drinking by yourselves, princelings?" a voice said from above them suddenly.

Spoken too soon. Loki's head snapped around much faster than Thor's did. It was the two men who had been watching him. Surprise.

With a smile that he hoped was charming, rather than sloppy, Loki said, "Well, I wouldn't say we're alone." Wait, was that supposed to be clever? The drink was getting to him. The drink had *gotten* to him.

Thor scooted his chair over and slung an arm around Loki's shoulders. "Only because we haven't found company yet!" he thundered. Loki tried to slither out from under his arm but Thor's fingers clamped around his shoulder, so he resigned himself to his brother's drunken clutches. "Join us, friends. And well met on this beautiful evening!"

Well, at least Loki had just learned that he wasn't drunk enough to *not* be embarrassed by Thor. Then again, there might not be enough drink in all the Nine Realms for that.

The men looked at each other and Loki felt another twist of uneasiness. One of them, his hair a

fiery ginger that Loki couldn't help letting his eyes linger on, elbowed the other, who was brawnier and uglier, with a nose that looked like it had been flattened by someone else's fists on more than one occasion.

"Perhaps if it was just *you* here, Your Highness," the uglier one said. Loki stiffened, but Thor didn't react. Either he didn't get it or didn't care. But Loki wasn't so far gone in drink that he didn't understand, nor did he miss the way the redhead's eyes narrowed at him. It sparked a flash of irritation in him—he was the *prince*, they had no right to look at him that way. But he looked down at the table, a habit honed in court, where it was easier to bow his head and dig his nails into his palms rather than argue with Father.

With a chuckle, Thor said, "It *is* just us here."

The man laughed too. It was much less nice than Thor's dumb, likable laugh. "Aye, Prince. You and your greasy brother."

The smile fell off Thor's face and he removed his arm from Loki's shoulders. "What?" he said, suddenly sounding far less drunk.

"It's not the grease we mind," the redhead piped up.

Loki raised his head, sensing danger. It was best not to be looking at your lap when you knew it was coming. His daggers were a comforting weight on his forearms, but Thor hadn't brought a weapon tonight. Why would he? Loki went out into the city by himself all the time, and he never had any trouble. And if one of them *was* going to have trouble, it would certainly be Loki—less trusted, less loved. Too pale, too quiet. Unnatural.

"No, not at all," the man said. "Who hasn't skipped a bath now and then? No, the thing is, we don't drink with faggots."

The room didn't actually fall silent, but it might as well have. There was a loud ringing, and it took Loki a second to realize it was in his own ears. His chest felt like something heavy, like the hammer Mjølfnir that was kept in the weapons vault, was compressing it to nothing, and he was fairly sure that his heart had stopped beating.

The man's grin was practically ghoulish. "Probably thinks no one sees him going into that whorehouse, the one where they keep the lads—"

The scrape of Thor's chair on the wood floor was deafening. He stood up slowly, which might have been because he was extremely drunk, but also might have been to make himself seem more threatening. Not that Thor really needed to make himself seem *more* threatening, as he was pretty threatening as it was. "That," he said in a dangerous voice, "was not a very nice thing to say."

The redhead took a step back. The ugly one, who'd just aired Loki's—dirty laundry? Skeletons?—didn't. He was mixing metaphors. This was something he'd preferred to think of as simply a thing that he just didn't talk about, but now that it had been announced to a roomful of people, it seemed like something he should have been much more ashamed of. Surely people didn't stare like that otherwise.

Then again, they may have been staring because of the look on Thor's face. "Apologize to my brother," Thor said.

The man looked at Loki and grinned. Loki folded his wrists inwards and fingered the hilts of his daggers, but he said in a low tone, "Thor, it's fine."

It wasn't fine, but he meant it wasn't worth it. Anyone who would say what had been said right to their faces was the last person on the planet who was going to turn around and apologize for it.

"Best listen to your brother," the man said with a leer. "Or maybe I should say 'sister.'"

Personally, Loki didn't find this insulting, but Thor clearly did. He was dangerously still, something that didn't bode well for their, er, company. And Loki knew that a normal Asgardian should be offended by all of this. The disrespect, if not the accusation itself. After all, Thor was.

But all Loki could see were repercussions spidering out from this moment, repercussions from getting angry, from standing up for himself, for fighting back. An Asgardian was *supposed* to fight back. But Loki knew that he couldn't win either way. If he fought back, his father would say he should have calmed the situation. If he didn't, everyone would think he was weak. And in any case, the fact that there'd been a confrontation in the first place would be blamed on him.

For a moment, Loki thought Thor might say something else. Give the man another chance to apologize. But Thor's stillness could turn to violence in the blink of an eye. Loki knew that. Anyone who had fought with Thor—or against him—knew that. But this man clearly, if his cocky grin was anything to go by, didn't.

Well, at least he wouldn't make that mistake in the future.

In a blur, Thor's fist swung out, connecting with the man's face with a wet crack of bone and cartilage. The man dropped like a stone, but when he hit the ground he tried to roll away. His red-headed friend stepped forward, bringing a fist up.

In a second, Loki was on his feet, holding out a hand that was suddenly grasping a dagger. The redhead jolted to a stop as Loki extended it so the point rested inches from the tip of the other man's nose. With an icy smile, Loki said, "I wouldn't."

The redhead's face twisted in a snarl, but he lowered his hands to his sides. There was *that* taken care of, at least.

Thor kicked the other man out from the table he was trying to crawl underneath, grabbing him by one of the pauldrons on his shoulders and hauling him to his feet. The man took a wild swing at Thor and missed. In return, Thor head-butted him, smashing his already ruined nose to an unrecognizable, bloody pulp. Then he slammed the man down on the table, one hand around his neck. The tabletop splintered and bowed with the force of the blow. Their ales splattered everywhere.

"Thor," Loki said warningly. "That's enough. He's an idiot—let him go." But Thor was too far gone. The rage of battle, he liked to call it. Loki preferred to think of it as dumb, animal bloodlust. The man's face was turning red while he wheezed, and his attempts to hit Thor were growing weaker.

"*Thor.*" Loki took a chance, lowered his dagger, and stepped forward. He wrapped a hand around his brother's shoulder and pulled him back, though of course his strength was no match for Thor's. If Thor wanted to kill this man, he could, and Loki would be powerless to stop him with mere strength. Sorcery, yes. But that was what had gotten them into this in the first place. And besides, Loki didn't think Thor would thank him for magicking him. "Stop. It's not worth it." Thor bared his teeth and squeezed his fist tighter around the man's neck. The man's eyes popped and his wheezing became a thin whistle, then the absence of anything in his gaping mouth as Thor cut off his air supply.

For a moment, Loki studied the man. He'd thought—he'd assumed—that he would feel a bolt of horror, of a desperate need to stop this so a life could be spared. But as he looked down and searched for that feeling, he just found a cold emptiness. What did he care if this man died?

What he cared about was not causing more trouble than had already been caused. About making sure Thor didn't do something rash and stupid. And about not getting the blame himself for something that he hadn't started, because for his whole life, people had been ready to believe the worst of him.

"Brother, please," Loki hissed. "Stop. *Think.*"

And why should this work now, when it rarely did? But Loki felt the tenseness go out of Thor's shoulder, and after a second, he released his hold on the man, pushing him away. The force of the push slid the man across the table and headfirst onto the floor, but he was moaning, so clearly he wasn't dead.

For the first time, Loki glanced around the alehouse. If there hadn't been silence before, there certainly was now. Everyone in the place was staring, and not in a friendly way. The look in Birger's eyes was unmistakable. *Get out, and don't come back.* Loki sighed. Oh well, it had been nice while it lasted. He supposed he'd find another pub at some point, but in the meantime, best to vacate this one. He flipped a few coins onto the table to pay for what they'd drunk—and a little extra, to cover the cost of the disruption. Then, he smiled as though nothing was wrong, met Thor's eyes, and walked to the door. Spine straight, shoulders back, the half-smile on his face that he wore when he didn't want anyone to know how much he was breaking inside.

He didn't even know why *this*, of all things, should crack one more piece of him. Certainly, it wasn't the idea of gossip about him. There was already gossip about the fact that he liked men as well as women. Mother already knew, anyway. She'd sat him down one day, several months after she'd noticed his eyes following not just some of the attractive serving girls, but also boys, and had the excruciatingly awful Talk with him that he was sure Thor had gotten from their father, not from her. "You know to take precautions to prevent disease, not just pregnancy?" she'd asked, and he'd managed to stammer, his face bright red and burning, "Yes, Mother, of course." Honestly he hadn't thought much about it, but the only thing that could have made that moment worse was admitting ignorance.

But Thor was here to witness this, and maybe that was what made it seem so awful. Thor, who meant the world to him, but whom he worried saw him as lesser. Lesser than his friends, the Warriors Three and the Lady Sif, lesser than every other Asgardian. Lesser than Thor himself. Why wouldn't he see Loki as lesser, when Thor was going to be king? When despite this display tonight, he'd receive no more punishment than a stern talking-to from Father?

Loki had kept his cool, Loki had defused the situation—they were walking away from this with everyone alive because of *him*. And yet he was the one who everyone would see as the one who hadn't done things quite right, while Thor, who'd nearly killed a man out of anger, would have his actions waved away. Loki's circumspection was a flaw, while Thor's hot-headedness was a virtue. Loki would never hold the throne because he wasn't Asgardian enough, and Thor was too Asgardian for his own good.

It wasn't that Loki didn't appreciate that his brother had almost killed a man to protect him. It was just, he didn't need to be protected, and he could see the outcome of this writ large as though it was scrawled across the front of the palace. It made him want to scream. It made him hate Thor with such a scalding fierceness that it scared him. He couldn't hate Thor. But nothing was fair, and Thor never did anything about it.

The two of them walked the dark streets of Asgard in silence, Thor's heavy breathing quieting the farther they got from the alehouse. Loki's chest, on the other hand, still felt tight. It was getting *harder* to breathe the farther they walked, instead of easier. His own inadequacy was bad enough, but the thought of what their father was going to say if he heard about this was worse. But worst of all, Thor wasn't saying anything. Loki doubted it was because he was too drunk to remember what had been said in the pub.

Another few minutes passed. A couple walked by arm-in-arm, nodding a greeting as they passed. When the street was empty again, Loki took a deep breath, which still didn't fill his lungs, and made himself speak. "I suppose you want to know if what they said is true," he said, staring straight ahead into the dark. His eyes found the palace, shining golden in the distance.

Thor made a noise. In his periphery, Loki saw his brother look towards him. "I know it's true," Thor said. "I mean, maybe not the part about the...um, establishment, but you liking men, I already knew that."

Swallowing, Loki said, "And?"

"And what?"

Loki stopped walking and it took Thor a couple steps to realize it. As Thor turned back to him, Loki asked, "And..." Words wouldn't seem to come. This wasn't how he'd planned this conversation. He *hadn't* planned this conversation. It didn't seem worth having. Well, that, and he was terrified that this would just be one more thing that made him less of an Asgardian. "Do you care?"

The puzzled look on Thor's face would have been funny in almost any other circumstance. There was nothing quite so amusing as befuddling his older brother, even though it wasn't exactly difficult to do. "Why would I care?" Thor asked. And then, "Did you *think* I would care?"

"I..." Loki hugged his arms over his chest until he realized it looked childish, like he had something to hide, something to be ashamed of. Dropping his arms to his side, he said, "They cared in there."

Thor snorted and shook his head. "They were fools. I've never known you to put any stock in the opinions of fools, brother."

"So you don't," Loki pressed. It seemed of the utmost importance that Thor actually say these words. Loki needed him to prove it, not with his fists, but on Loki's territory, by saying it. Out loud. Unequivocally. Plainly.

Shaking his head, still looking befuddled, Thor said, "No. There's nothing to care about." Then he paused and took a step closer. Reaching out to put a hand to the back of Loki's neck, he said, "Loki. Even if there was, you're my brother. And I still wouldn't care."

Loki wanted to hug him. But that vein of resentment was still there and it stopped him. Instead, he swallowed hard and just stood there for a moment, Thor's hand cupping the back of his head while he felt something inside him splintering.

And for the first time, he identified it. It was the feeling of his jealousy and love butting up against each other, two immovable forces that wouldn't yield to the other. With a flash of insight that felt more like seeing into the future, like a faint hint of his mother's witchcraft (none of which had been passed down to him), he realized this battle was going to shape his life.

And right then, he wasn't sure love would win.

"Loki?" Thor said, sounding unsure.

He forced himself to smile, and as he met Thor's eyes, the resentment receded. Reaching up, he wrapped a hand around Thor's forearm and said, "Thank you." There was more to say, but it was beyond him. It was too much.

"Nothing to thank me for," Thor said, sounding relieved. Then, he ruffled Loki's hair, which he knew Loki hated. But this old, familiar argument was safe, and they retreated to it as they continued their walk back to the palace. Loki smoothed his hair down and wished he could do the same with the cracks in his life. Something felt changed, and it was frightening, and he felt in his bones that there was no going back to safety, no matter how much he might try.

## Chapter 3

Loki shifted in his camp bed, reaching up to pull the orb of light floating next to him closer before he turned the page of his book. Wind rattled the walls of the tent, but the storm outside wasn't enough to drown out the rising and falling swells of sound from the impromptu feast that had sprung up several tent rows over. He paused for a moment, listening, knowing the right thing to do—the expected thing to do—was to be there himself. Eating, drinking, bragging and inflating whatever deeds he'd accomplished in battle that day. And singing, apparently, if the sound he could hear was any indication—and if one was extremely generous with their definition of 'singing.'

They were on Alfheim, one of the Nine Realms, which was facing a minor insurrection; nothing that Asgard's forces couldn't put down in a week or two. They'd been there three days and the tide of the war was already turning in their favor. Still, it had been a shock when the Bifrost had brought them there. Years ago, Mother had taken Loki and Thor to visit, and Loki had found the planet breathtaking. Asgard was beautiful, of course, the pinnacle of the Nine Realms, but the lacy architecture of Ljosalfgard and the forests twinkling with lights was captivating. Thor had wanted to capture a unicorn and ride it; Mother had forbidden it, and added for good measure that if he was gored, he'd have to sit in bed for the duration of the trip and wouldn't be allowed to have any fun.

The forests were nowhere to be seen now, though. Or the unicorns, for that matter, though during that long ago visit, neither Thor nor Loki had gotten anywhere near one, anyway. The rebel army was moving towards Ljosalfgard, burning everything as it went, and the tall, graceful trees that had fascinated Loki as a child were nothing but smoldering stumps now. Whole towns had been reduced to rubble, with the bodies of those who had been unable to flee lying amid the wreckage.

In the last such ruin they'd passed through, Loki had stopped to stare down into the face of a dead elf. Her legs were pinned under the collapsed wall of a building, crushed beyond repair, but what had killed her was the discharge weapon that had been fired into her stomach. Tarry blood, turning black as it dried, was spread around her. Not a quick death, or a painless one. He'd knelt down and closed her eyes, but he couldn't do anything about the howl of pain that twisted the rest of her face.

A crack of thunder brought him back to the present with a jolt. He realized he'd been staring at the same sentence on the page, reading it over and over again. With a yawn, he closed the book and set it aside on the small, ornate table he'd carted to Alfheim from Asgard. The book was a treatise on astral projection, wherein the author theorized that with the proper source of power, the range of the projection could be amplified infinitely. Interesting, but not the lightest reading after a day of battle. He'd brought other books—and been roundly mocked for it—but his focus was shot to hell. Whatever he picked up, he'd only end up sitting with it open on his lap while his mind wandered.

At that moment, the tent flap burst open, letting in a spray of wind and rain. "It's pissing down out there," Thor said, apparently to no one in particular, because when his eyes fell on Loki, he added, "Ah. I thought I'd find you hiding here."

"I'm hardly hiding," Loki said. "Anyway, I was tired." He flicked his light orb higher and expanded it with a twist of his hand so that it illuminated more of the space. Thor looked at it, shook his head a little, and switched on the lights on his side of their shared tent. "What?" Loki asked, raising an eyebrow.

Glancing at him, Thor replied, "Tricks."

With a slight smile, Loki said, "Correct me if I'm wrong, brother, but one of my tricks prevented

an axe from lodging in that thick skull of yours earlier.”

Thor snorted. “Not so tired that your wit’s dulled, I see.”

“Well, no. Never.”

Removing the vambraces from his forearms, Thor chuckled, then said, “You should have joined us. No party is complete without your troublemaking.”

Loki put a hand over his heart, a grin twitching at his mouth. “I’m touched. I had no idea I was so appreciated.”

“That,” Thor said, “and the fact that Fandral couldn’t stop bragging about how many more rebels he slew than the both of us combined. I could’ve used your help knocking him down a peg or two.”

“Mm. Sorry to disappoint you,” Loki said.

Thor snorted. Removing his cape and slinging it over a chair back, he asked, “What are you reading, anyway?”

With a glance at the book, Loki said, “I don’t think it would interest you.”

“I don’t think so either.” Thor smirked at him. “I’m just trying to show some interest in the things my little brother’s interested in.”

Rolling his eyes good-naturedly, Loki said, “Ah, I see. Mockery, then patronization. What a day.”

Thor chuckled and came over to pick up the book. “Astral projection,” he said, then looked at Loki. “You already know how to do this.”

Loki raised an eyebrow. It was always a surprise when Thor demonstrated that he knew what Loki was capable of. “You already know how to swing a sword, but you still train.”

“Hm.” Thor put the book down. “Once Father gives me Mjølfnir, I won’t have to.”

Right. Mjølfnir. It had been heavily implied, when Father had sent them to quell the uprising on Alfheim, that the reward for success would be Mjølfnir. For Thor, of course. For Loki, well, he supposed the reward was the satisfaction of a job well done. Once, when they’d been children, the two of them had snuck down to the weapons vault to see if they could lift the hammer. Thor hadn’t hesitated; he’d strutted up to it and yanked on its handle. It had come off its stone pedestal easily, and Thor had crowed and brandished it while Loki had stood there grinning.

Then, Thor had set it down and said, his face flushed with happiness, “You try it!”

Loki had reached for the handle. But he’d stopped, his arm outstretched, and closed his fingers around nothing but air before withdrawing his hand. What if he couldn’t? What if he wasn’t worthy? So he shook his head and had said, “Father will be angry if he finds out we came down here.”

This was a thin excuse to put off learning something about himself that he didn’t want to learn, but even at a young age, Loki had been all-too-cognizant of his own failings. Thor had looked crestfallen, which almost made him feel guilty enough to try lifting Mjølfnir, despite his misgivings.

Almost.

Rain beat on the tent, which luckily was imbued with enough Asgardian technology to keep all of it



outside. Winter on Alfheim, at least in this hemisphere. If the blood didn't turn the battlefields to mud, the rain would. Loki glanced up, his brow furrowed, as thunder rumbled and a gust of wind made the canvas billow like a sail. "The weather could be better."

"If it doesn't stop, it will just make the battle more glorious," Thor said.

Smirking, Loki said, "I think I find dry clothing more glorious than battle."

Thor shook his head at Loki, looking like someone had just told a wonderful joke, but only he was in on it. "You enjoy it, admit it. You can pretend you're above it all you like, but I see it in your eyes." He paused, clearly wanting his punchline, or thesis, or whatever this was, to really land. "That's the rage of battle, brother."

Loki somehow hadn't expected *that*. Taken aback and hoping it wasn't showing, he said, "You're mistaken."

Thor sat down on his bed and pulled off his boots. "If you say so." He smiled. "I'm happy to have you here, anyway. Knowing you and those daggers are at my back makes me feel safer."

"Glad to be of service," Loki said, just enough of a smirk in his tone to hide his pleasure at these words. It was no secret that Thor thought quite a lot of his skills on the battlefield. Rightly so, as he was more like a force of nature than a mere warrior. Hearing you were wanted—even, maybe, needed—while fighting alongside him wasn't something Loki took lightly. It probably wasn't something Thor admitted lightly, either.

Thor chuckled and laid down, his hands laced under his head, but Loki remained sitting, staring at the opposite wall of the tent and fidgeting with his hands. The rage of battle. Ridiculous. If there was one thing that Loki was good at, it was *not* letting his emotions get away from him. He was as collected in battle as he was any other time. To lose your head was to invite costly mistakes. Absently, he ran his thumbnail over his other fingernails. He feared losing himself, anyway. Sometimes he thought it would be all too easy, when he wasn't always sure who he was to begin with.

"You're quiet, brother," Thor said.

Loki glanced over at him. "Just thinking."

"You think too much."

"Possibly."

Propping himself up on his elbow and facing Loki, Thor said, "This is war, Loki. You get up, you slay the enemy, you drink, you feast, and then you go to bed so you can do it all over again the next day. There's nothing to think about."

With a slight smile and a mirthless exhalation of laughter, Loki said, "I'm not like you, Thor."

"Really? That's *so* shocking, whatever could you be talking about?"

Loki gave his brother a sidelong look. Once in a while, Thor displayed a snideness that came directly from Mother. While Loki was truly their mother's son, some of it was bound to rub off on Thor, too. "I don't *mind* battle," he said. "I'm perfectly happy fighting to protect Asgard and the Nine Realms. But you know I'd rather be sitting by the water, reading a book."

"Or causing mischief," Thor said without missing a beat, which made Loki shrug in

acknowledgment of this point. Thor stared at Loki for a minute, and then he said, “Perhaps you should...” But then he trailed off and shook his head. “Never mind.”

“Perhaps I should what?” Loki asked, a sharp edge to his tone that he knew would put Thor on the defensive.

A flicker of irritation crossed Thor’s face. “Perhaps you should take greater pains to be more like a warrior. We’re Asgardians, Loki. We don’t hide in bushes and cast spells. We face the enemy head on.”

Loki’s eyes narrowed. “A dead rebel is a dead rebel. It doesn’t matter if I stood in front of him and ran him through with a sword or if I distracted him with an illusion while I threw a dagger through his windpipe.” Tilting his chin up, he said, “And I hardly ‘hide in the bushes.’ Don’t be insulting.”

“The men talk,” Thor said, still sounding prickly.

Ah. So *that* was the issue. There Thor had been, just trying to get drunk with the Warriors Three and the Lady Sif while they compared body counts, and it had been interrupted by the troops questioning Loki’s prowess on the battlefield. Or perhaps even his commitment to the battle itself. What an *inconvenience*. How *embarrassing*. “Do they,” Loki said, his tone flat. “And do you defend me, brother? Or do you let them talk?”

Thor rolled his eyes. “Don’t start this.”

Loki held up his hands, his eyes widening a little in an expression of sarcastic innocence. “I thought *you* started it. Didn’t you just tell me to stop hiding in the bushes?”

With a frustrated sigh, Thor said, “You take everything the wrong way.”

“Perhaps you should choose your words more carefully,” Loki shot back.

For a long moment, Thor glared. Loki tried to return it with a look of cool haughtiness. Finally, Thor said, “Of course I defend you. But when even Hogun and Sif—”

At this, Loki’s mask dropped, he knew it did, and he knew that for a split second, the hurt showed on his face. Thor’s glare slipped as well and guilt flashed across his features. Well, Loki *had* just told him to choose his words more carefully. It would do his brother good to listen. Otherwise you ended up saying things that other people didn’t need to hear.

Loki snorted derisively, a hard twist of a smile on his face. “I see.” The fact that Sif was bad-mouthing him stung more than he cared to admit. His feelings towards her toed the line between platonic and something more on and off for years, though he knew he’d never stand a chance with her. Thor was her type. Blond, muscle-y, typical Asgardian male. Which made her just like everyone else. Loki held out his hand and snapped his fingers shut, and the orb of light hovering over him snuffed out.

“Loki—”

“Good-night, Thor,” he said, his voice tight. Anger and resentment coiled in the pit of his stomach like a viper, slithering up his spine to the base of his skull so that it sat there, an intrusive otherness scratching at his mind. As he laid down, he knew it would keep him awake, and that Thor probably wouldn’t be fooled by his stillness. He could cast an illusion, so that it looked like he was sleeping, and then leave his slumbering form here and roam the dark encampment, if he wanted to.

But he didn’t want to. He wanted to not feel like an outsider amongst his family and friends. He

wanted 'Asgardian' to encompass his particular gifts too.

"Loki," Thor said again.

He ignored his brother and closed his eyes. Tomorrow, Thor would have forgotten about this. Thor never had any trouble forgetting the things he said and did that wounded Loki. *That* was a gift, he supposed, his face twisting in the dark. A very particular gift to be able to let go of words that hurt, one which he both hated and longed to have. Of course, Thor didn't need to remember hurtful words, because the only person who ever flung any of them at him were Loki himself, and very little that Loki said was worth remembering in the eyes of his family and friends.

Fine. Thor would forget. Loki would try to, as well.

## Chapter 4

“Father’s going to name you his heir soon.”

Mjølfnir’s whistling stopped as Thor caught it and didn’t toss it again. Loki could practically *hear* his brother’s self-satisfaction in the long pause before he said, “You don’t know that.”

Loki sniffed and shifted on his feet, but didn’t turn around. He was standing at the window in the living room of Thor’s quarters, his arms crossed over his chest. The door that adjoined their rooms was open, and Thor had lined himself up across from the door to have a clear shot into Loki’s chambers with Mjølfnir. And while Loki didn’t have any particular trust that Thor wouldn’t misjudge the strength of his own arm and break everything in Mjølfnir’s path, he’d long ago moved everything away from that wall in his room to prevent just such an eventuality.

It had been a long time since the adjoining door had been open. But Loki still hadn’t ever moved anything back to that spot.

Honestly, they were too old for it. Too old for the door to be open, too old for it to exist at all. They were adults, not children. The fact that they still had quarters next to each other was infantile. It was just that neither of them had ever seen fit to ask to move elsewhere in the palace. When they’d been young, they’d left the door open often. Though it pained him to remember this, even to himself, Loki had been terrified of the dark as a boy. Terrible things lurked in the dark. Monsters. Frost Giants. Every child in Asgard was told ghost stories about the Frost Giants, and while others had seemed to enjoy being scared by them, those stories had haunted Loki’s nightmares. Obviously, now it seemed ridiculous, but at the time, he’d been sure that a Frost Giant was going to come take him to Jotunheim. They’d use the Bifrost and break into his room and take him away.

And the worst part was that he’d never been sure his father would want to come get him back.

Stupid.

So the door adjoining their rooms had been open most nights when they’d been children. Even if Loki hadn’t been sure their father would save him, he’d never doubted that Thor would.

Possibly even more stupid.

In any case, he’d grown out of it.

Loki drummed his fingers on his arm and watched ships criss-cross Asgardian airspace. Perhaps it was because of those childhood nightmares, but he’d always preferred space travel to travel via the Bifrost. Not that he had much opportunity for it. An Asgardian prince used the Bifrost. End of story. *Stop arguing, Loki, there’s no reason for you to take a ship, no reason for you to be on one at all.*

If his father had ever bothered to ask *why* about anything, Loki wasn’t sure he’d be able to articulate a reason he wanted what he wanted. Why he’d wanted to learn how to pilot a ship, why he’d wanted a skiff of his own, why he’d kept sneaking out and borrowing—it wasn’t stealing if you brought them back—the skiffs that the Einherjar used to patrol. At least that was a battle he’d eventually won, though more through his persistence than his persuasive reasoning. But the point was moot, because Odin never asked why. Loki’s attempts to not care about this had met with mixed success over the years.

It was the sort of thing that led him to snarl at his brother, or sometimes his mother, after the fact.

Easy targets. They put up with him. He didn't deserve it. Didn't deserve them. And that made him angry, too.

"Which part are you questioning?" Loki asked, still staring out the window. More of a glare, really. "The fact that it's going to be soon, or the fact that it's going to be you?" When Thor was silent, Loki turned his head to look at him, an eyebrow arched.

Thor grimaced, recognizing a trap when he heard one, and tossed Mjøl̃nir again. Loki didn't watch it, but perversely, he hoped that Thor put a hole in the wall with it, so Loki would have a good reason to get angry. "Was there a point to you coming in here?" Thor asked, apparently figuring he'd be nasty before Loki was able to.

With an exhale of joyless laughter, Loki said, sarcasm dripping, "I suppose I was just seeking your scintillating company." This was unfair, and when Thor looked wounded, it wasn't a surprise. But that was what Loki had been trying to do. Game, set, match, he supposed.

Mjøl̃nir returned to Thor's hand and he put it down on the floor with a clunk. "You don't know it's going to be me," he said, answering what Loki had meant to be a rhetorical question.

Snorting derisively, Loki said, "You've never been a good liar, brother." Unlike Loki himself. But Thor didn't realize how good a liar Loki was. After all, he was in the orbit of most of Loki's lies, not usually the intended target, but close enough that he needed deceiving, too. Of course, one of Loki's biggest lies was that he didn't care if Thor got the throne, and he was taking an axe to that one right now, wasn't he?

Then again, Thor didn't seem surprised at Loki's behavior. So maybe he wasn't much of a liar after all.

With a sigh, Thor joined him at the window. Loki looked away from him, returning his gaze to Asgard, gleaming white and gold and beautiful under a bright summer sun. In the distance, the water sparkled. If the wind blew right, and you opened the windows, you could hear the roar of the water plummeting off the edge of the world as a dull, low buzz just at the edge of your awareness. The sight of it made his chest ache. It was his, and yet it would never be *his*, because he'd never be king.

He didn't even *want* to be king. Not really. He didn't want to have to worry about invasions, or protecting the other realms, or any of the day-to-day things that kept their father busy. As the years had passed, time and the burden of the throne had clearly taken their toll. Odin looked weary. He looked *old*. Ruling the Nine Realms took something from you—possibly everything. Loki could see that, though Thor didn't. Thor saw only the chance to make Asgard even more glorious, whatever *that* meant.

Still, it hurt, because it meant Father had never seen him as capable of ruling. He'd always favored Thor and never made much of a secret of it. Loki didn't want to be king. He just wanted his father to trust that he could have done it.

"What do you want me to say?" Thor said.

Loki ran a hand through his hair. It was a good question. What he wanted was for everything to be different, so that Thor didn't even have to ask. It hadn't been asked insincerely, but there was an edge of defensiveness to his brother's tone.

Drawing in a slow breath through his nose, he held it for a moment, then let it out. "I don't know," he said, honest about this for perhaps the first time. It didn't make him feel better. He opened his

mouth to—what? Ask Thor if *he* thought Loki would have been a good king? He hated how needy that made him sound. Anyway, he knew what the answer was. Over the years, Thor had made it abundantly clear that he shared their father’s assessment. Nice to have around, but not to be trusted or especially valued for his skillset. His usefulness in battle was undeniable, but no proper Asgardian would ever admit it, and they certainly wouldn’t celebrate him for the times that magic and illusions had helped turn the tide of a fight.

“Is that why you invited yourself in?” Thor asked. “To complain about Father’s choice?”

“I thought you said we didn’t know what his choice was,” Loki said, raising his eyebrows and looking at Thor.

The look of guilt on Thor’s face was almost comical. “We don’t,” he said hastily.

Loki smiled. Half-smiled. With a snort, he said, “But we do.” The expression on Thor’s face flipped Loki’s seesawing emotions decisively one way, and his smile became gentler. Or possibly just more resigned. “I’m happy for you, brother. Truly, I am.” Gesturing towards Mjølfnir, he added, “You’re the worthy one. You always have been, let’s face it.”

Thor still looked uneasy, but he tried to smile back. “You’ve never even tried to lift it.”

Glancing towards the hammer gleaming on the floor, Loki said, “No.” Mjølfnir *looked* immovable. A solid, implacable reminder of his own lack of worth in everyone’s eyes. “I think we both know what the outcome would be.”

Thor patted Loki on the shoulder, which felt like being hit with a sack full of lead. “You’ve performed many glorious deeds in battle.”

“Do you *want* me to be able to lift it?” Loki asked. This was half snark, half genuine curiosity. Thor’s mouth opened and gaped for a moment as he thought about the implications of that scenario, and Loki laughed. “Don’t worry. If glorious deeds in battle were all it took to lift that piece of hardware, three-quarters of Asgard would be taking it in turns to carry it around. It’s just your innate—”

He’d meant to sneer *your innate perfection*, but it wasn’t fair. They’d been children the first time Thor had lifted Mjølfnir, long before any glory had been earned in battle. The hammer had sensed something in Thor—and sensed the opposite in Loki. Or, if not the opposite, then just not enough of whatever Thor had in spades. The worthiness gene. It obviously came with giant muscles, blond hair, and a lack of nuance.

Unfair again. Thor didn’t deserve that. But then, Loki also didn’t know what Thor had done to deserve their father’s favor. And conversely, he didn’t know what he’d done to *not* deserve it. When the time finally came to declare his heir, would Odin pull out a list and reveal his score-keeping? Because that was how it felt—like a game that he couldn’t win, because it had been rigged against him from the minute he’d been born. How could he have ever hoped to compete against Thor? Thor was everything that Loki wished he could be, as much as he didn’t want to admit it.

Maybe not in the brains department. Loki would take his wits and cleverness over Thor’s more—er —*middling* intelligence.

Still unfair. He couldn’t seem to help himself.

Loki sighed and finally finished, “You were always meant for the throne. You’re everything a king

of Asgard is supposed to be.” He hesitated. “You’re a good man.” And was that all it took to rule Asgard? Was their father a good man? For a long, long time, Loki hadn’t questioned that he was. But then he’d started asking—himself and others—where had the Nine Realms come from? Why did the other eight bow to Asgard? Obviously the Frost Giants and the Dark Elves were monsters, but what about Alfheim? Vanaheim? The Frost Giants were evil and had deserved what they’d gotten, but could the same be said for all the realms?

War, of course. War was the answer. Their tutor had always been vague on the subject and had not gotten less so over the years as Loki’s questions (and his stare as he’d asked them) had become keener. The library, which had seemed at one point to contain all the knowledge in the universe, had a suspicious lack of books or scrolls on the subject of the formation of the Nine Realms. Mother would only say that sometimes war was necessary.

If you waged war—killed—to protect your home, did that make it better? If you did it to protect everything and everyone you loved, was war and slaughter excusable? The sagas and the stories they’d been raised on would have had you believe one thing, and their father’s actions another. In all their lessons and discussions about kingship, he’d always emphasized the value of diplomacy and treaties, that talking to one’s enemies could be just as good, if not better, than fighting with them.

Loki had always taken those lessons to heart. He was the talker of the pair of them. The diplomat. It was hard to tell if Father was pleased by this. One couldn’t exactly ignore that Thor had earned Mjølfnir after successfully putting down the revolt on Alfheim all those years ago. He definitely hadn’t done it by talking. Loki, though, had been the one who had led the peace talks between the rebels and the ruling family they’d tried to depose. And while Odin had told him he’d done a good job, he still wasn’t the one with the hammer made of the special metal from the heart of a dying star.

Maybe it was the anticipation of that inescapable fact on Alfheim that had made him pull aside one of the Ice Elves that had led the rebellion. “Next time,” he’d said in a low voice, “get the people on your side instead of slaughtering them.” Maybe he’d been thinking of the Elf girl in the village. Or maybe he’d just been trying to cause mischief. To start something, just to sit back and watch the chaos that ensued. In any case, so far there hadn’t been a next time. Together, Thor and Loki had been convincing enough to halt further violence.

Thor was staring at him, and that jolted Loki back to the present. “Do you really think that?” Thor asked.

For a moment, Loki couldn’t remember what he’d said. Ah. Right. His brother was a good man. “Of course I do,” he said. And then, because this had been a bit too heartfelt, he added, “It would just be denying the obvious if I didn’t.”

There was an odd look on Thor’s face. Almost...doubtful? But that couldn’t be right. Thor had never doubted anything in his life. Not his own abilities, his own fitness for the throne, his own worth. He’d never doubted Loki either, and that was something else that Loki didn’t deserve. “What?” Loki asked without thinking. Because if there was one thing they didn’t do in this family, it was talk openly. About anything.

Thor looked startled, and immediately, the look of doubt, or whatever it had been, disappeared. Interesting. It seemed his brother was better at hiding his emotions than Loki gave him credit for. “Nothing,” Thor said.

Well, of course he did. Everything was always nothing. Gone were the days when the two of them had shared every thought that crossed their minds. Fears, doubts, hopes, dreams—it was so long

ago that it seemed like it should be part of a mythical past, a plot thread in those sagas they'd been raised hearing. But they were bound to emulate their parents as they grew older, and by the time they reached adolescence, they were both adept at keeping everything bottled up inside.

Then, Thor said in a too-casual voice, "It must be kind of nice."

For a moment, Loki waited expectantly. When Thor didn't say anything more, though, Loki asked, "Was there more to that thought? I haven't quite reached the stage of reading minds yet."

A flicker of alarm crossed Thor's face, which made a smile twitch at Loki's face. Oh, his dear brother. Did that mean he had thoughts that he didn't want Loki being privy to? Normally he'd assume they centered on his extracurricular activities with whatever maiden had caught his eye, but the memory of the doubt on Thor's face lingered.

Shaking his head, Thor said, "It must be kind of nice to not have everyone's expectations on you."

Loki's brow furrowed. "You're joking."

"No." Thor looked puzzled. "How is that a joke?"

Blinking, Loki replied, "If anyone struggles to meet expectations in this family, it isn't *you*. You just...meet them. You *embody* them."

Thor looked sad, and it suddenly struck Loki that his brother had reached out as best he knew how—and Loki had tossed that back in his face. "I just meant everyone expects everything from me."

"And no one expects anything from me," Loki replied flatly. "Yes, I suppose when you put it like that, it *is* easier. It must be so inconvenient and tedious, being groomed for the throne, everyone just assuming you'll be a natural when—" *When you've done nothing to deserve them thinking that*, was what he'd been about to say. But Thor looked stung, so he clamped down on the urge to be cruel.

But Thor seemed to know what Loki had almost said. Sometimes, once in a very great while, Loki thought he perhaps didn't give Thor enough credit. For a long moment, Thor looked at him, emotions passing over his face in waves and his jaw clenched in that way that usually preceded him punching something. It generally *wasn't* Loki's face—well, not since they'd grown out of the punching-and-or-stabbing-each-other-as-problem-solving phase, but really, it was only a matter of time.

The silence stretched. Had he finally pushed his brother too far?

Then, Thor shook his head and walked away to pick up Mjølfnir. There was a chill in the empty space he left behind at Loki's side. Loki turned and said, "Thor."

His brother looked at him. What had possessed Loki to say anything? Because he'd wanted to apologize. But he *didn't* want to apologize. He wanted...what? Everything, and nothing specific. It filled him, this imprecise longing for something that he didn't have and couldn't name, and it hurt, a hard, gnawing ache behind his sternum, into his gut and out to his fingertips. He wanted to not always feel as though he was one word away from an abyss, to not always be standing on the knife's edge of defensiveness and resentment. He wanted to not fight with Thor.

Loki swallowed and looked away. Thor waited another moment before saying, "I'm going to train. Close the door when you leave."

"Of course," Loki said, his tone carefully neutral.



It would have been better if Thor had stomped out. As it was, Loki was left standing alone in his brother's quarters. He squeezed his eyes shut and let out a breath. It didn't matter. Who cared if Thor was upset at him? He'd get over it. Loki didn't care.

Well. All the best liars told the greatest lies to themselves, didn't they?

## Chapter 5

A breeze ruffled Loki's hair as he stood staring out at the water, fingers wrapped around one of the small, flat stones that he'd collected on his way here. The day was overcast, cool, with a damp undertone that warned of winter. Loki didn't shiver. He never did. The cold didn't bother him the way it did other people.

He rubbed his fingers over the stone in his hand and looked down at it. It hadn't come from Asgard. There were no tides here, no waves beating rocks against each other for the eons it would take to round a stone like this, flatten and smooth all its rough edges. These stones were imported from elsewhere, Vanaheim, he thought, to make Asgard's beaches prettier. Otherwise they were just basaltic flats jutting into the water, weathered but still sharp and craggy. Absolute murder on the shoes, let alone the soles of one's feet.

Loki turned the stone over in his hand, then hooked a finger around it, drew his arm back, and let it fly. It skipped six, seven, eight times, before sinking into the gray water.

For a moment, he stood still, his hands on the wall. This had always been one of his favorite places in the city: a small terrace at the water's edge, ringed by benches cut into the wall. It wasn't easy to get to, even though there was a path straight there from the palace. Newer houses blocked the original access, which no one had noticed, or cared about, when they'd started building. He himself had only spotted it when he'd been piloting a skiff along the shoreline one day—years ago, back when he'd still been sneaking the skiffs out. He'd come back later to poke around. Reaching it on foot involved scrambling along the jumbled boulders that formed the shore in this part of Asgard. It was, to put it mildly, not dignified. But being there was worth it. He'd sit there for hours and read, or think, or simply watch gulls wheeling on updrafts.

No one ever bothered him. It wasn't a secret that he went there, as anyone flying by or on the water could plainly see him. But there was no one on Asgard, or any of the Nine Realms, that wanted so badly to speak with him that they'd go to the trouble of seeking him out there.

He reached into his pocket again and closed his hand around another stone. There were no gulls today. The fishing boats were unloading on the other side of the city, so that was where they'd be. It was quiet on the terrace, just the breeze rattling the leaves that were still clinging to their branches and the light chop of the water below. Occasionally a larger ship passed by, but with the weather turning cold, no one was out for fun.

Without looking at it, he pulled the stone from his pocket and skipped it. Only seven. He wasn't very good at this.

Then, the sound of rock crunching under a shoe, followed by scree tumbling into the water below, reached his ears. He turned around, his eyes searching for the source, as he wondered who would possibly want to come out here when it was clearly already occupied. Then, seeing the figure picking its way along the rocks, he pressed his lips together and sighed, his brow furrowing.

He went to help, saying, "Mother, that's far too treacherous for you."

"Oh, Loki, stop," she said, batting his hand away lightly when he reached for her. He withdrew it as though he'd been burned, which made her look at his face. Something flickered across her features, and she tightened her grip around her dress and held out a hand to him.

Transparent, the pair of them. He needed to feel needed, and she knew it and would indulge him.

When they were both standing back on solid ground, Frigga smiled at him. He offered her his arm gallantly and she took it. As the two of them walked slowly back to the terrace, she said, "I thought I'd find you here."

Loki looked at her. "Is something wrong?"

Shaking her head and giving him a half-smile, she said, "No, of course not. I was taking a walk."

"Taking a walk," he repeated doubtfully. "You have to climb over a wall to get out here."

"Well, it isn't a very *high* wall," she said, her smile widening fractionally.

With a small laugh, Loki said, "No, I suppose not." For a moment, he looked at his mother, and then he dropped his arm and went to stand where he'd been before, looking out over the water. He threw another rock as Frigga joined him. This one just plunked straight into the waves. He was getting worse. Leave it to him.

"Your brother has been looking for you all morning," Frigga said. She was dressed warmly, in a wool dress and a fur draped over her shoulders. There was a look of disapproving appraisal on her face at his lack of proper clothing, but she'd long ago given up trying to make him dress for cold that he didn't feel.

Loki made a sound, not quite a laugh, but not quite *not* a laugh. "I'm not sure what he could possibly need me for."

There was still a faint smile on Frigga's face. "Preparations, he says."

"I doubt it. They seem to be well in hand."

This was something of an understatement. Servants had been racing around the palace for weeks now, preparing everything for the coronation and the feast that would follow. But things had reached a fevered pitch in the last two days. You could barely walk through the corridors without tripping over a servant mumbling about chairs and place settings, and the heat emanating from the kitchen had kept Loki away from that wing of the palace entirely. The fact that he had to put up with this for a further three days was exhausting to think about.

*The coronation.* That made it sound so distant. As though it wasn't really a concern of his, nothing that affected him personally. Just something he was attending out of obligation, like the wedding of a distant relation, some cousin of an aunt three times removed from his mother.

*Thor's coronation.* There. He'd thought it. Said the words in his own mind. As though he hadn't been talking with Thor about this for years. Joked about it, laughed about it, looked forward to it, even.

And dreaded it. In recent years, his feelings had tilted far more towards dread. And it was made worse for the fact that he could never say anything about it. Ever. To anyone. Certainly not to Thor, who was like a particularly eager puppy about the whole thing. As much as it could be entertaining to wind him up, Loki shied away from truly hurting him. The idea of a heart to heart with the Warriors Three and Sif was an hilarious joke. His father? Even more hysterical. They should call him the God of Jokes, not Mischief.

His dread, his concerns, would only look like jealousy. They weren't. His concerns were real. His worry was rooted in his love for Asgard, his faith in his father's rule, and his fear that Asgard's enemies would take advantage of weakness. He understood that Asgard's unification of the Nine Realms hadn't always been peaceful, and that there would always be those who would chafe at the

Allfather's rule. Hadn't Alfheim proved that? Those rebels' ambitions had been small, planetary instead of Yggdrasil-wide, but there would always be war. There would always be someone who thought they could do things better than whoever was currently in charge.

His mother was watching him. He got the uncomfortable feeling that she knew what he was thinking. Raised by witches, and the wisest, most perceptive person he knew. It was a potent combination. If he didn't know what he'd done to *not* deserve his father's favor, he didn't know what he'd done to deserve hers.

He smiled, trying to make it look convincing, and said, "I needed some air."

She returned the smile, her lips curving into a crooked smirk, as she joined him at the wall and looked out over the water. "Now, *that* is a feeling I can understand," she said. Loki's smile felt more effortless, then. He pulled another stone out of his pocket but held onto it. After a moment, Frigga held out a hand and said, "May I?"

When he dropped it into her palm, she moved it around in her hand for a minute, then looked into the distance and threw it. It skipped twelve or thirteen times. "You used magic," he said, mock accusation in his tone.

Raising an eyebrow, Frigga said, "Come now, Loki, you know I can't do that kind of magic."

He chuckled and handed her another. Fifteen skips. She was cheating, but then, he had a certain appreciation for cheating.

For several minutes, the two of them stood there in silence. A heron slipped along the rocks below like a shadow, its movement becoming stutter-stop as it spotted something in the water and paused. Further away, in deeper water, a shape passed close to the surface before disappearing again. A ray, probably, or maybe a sunfish.

Mother accepted another stone but turned this one over in her hands instead of throwing it. After a moment, she leaned her arms on the wall and hung her hands over it. The wind caught a few strands of her hair and blew them across her face. "Something's troubling you," she said.

It didn't surprise him that she could tell. Honestly, he wasn't being particularly subtle. But he still said, "No, everything's fine."

"Loki." Turning to him and giving him that Look that only she could do—the one that clearly said, *I know you're lying, you know I know you're lying, and we should just be frank with each other to save time.* "It's my job to know when something's wrong with my children. I'm very good at it."

He twined his fingers together, fidgeting without thinking about it. There was no way he could say what was bothering him. It simply wasn't possible. It wasn't just not possible, it also wasn't smart. Or charitable, or fair, or kind. But mostly it wasn't smart, and Loki prided himself on being the smart one. The one that *didn't* just blurt out the first thing that crossed his mind. The one who thought before he spoke and thought even more before he acted.

Then again, this *was* important. And perhaps there wasn't room for charity or fairness or kindness in something this important.

She waited in silence while he chewed at his lip. No. He couldn't say anything. He wouldn't. The wind blew again and he had to brush his hair out of his face.

"I don't think Thor's ready to be king," he blurted. His eyes flicked up to meet hers, then away, his heart clenched tight in horror that he'd actually said it out loud to his mother. *Their* mother.

He closed his eyes, knowing he'd said something monumentally idiotic that he couldn't take back. The best case scenario was that she'd walk away and never mention this moment ever again. The worst case scenario...well, that was unthinkable, so he wouldn't think it.

But there was just silence. She wasn't walking away and she wasn't berating him for saying this unsayable thing. Not that she'd ever berated him, but there was a first time for everything. He opened his eyes and looked at her. She was watching him without a trace of anger. Still, he said, "I shouldn't have said that."

"I asked you to tell me what was bothering you," she replied gently. "And I meant it."

Emboldened by this despite his misgivings, he said, "I worry. I worry that he's too hot-headed, too...too arrogant, and cocky, and reckless. I know he's got Asgard's best interests at heart but I also know that sometimes he's blinded by..." He hesitated, thinking of all the times Thor's anger had gotten the better of him, and of how Loki had always done his best to rein it in. Of the times he hadn't been successful, even though he often had been. There would be times when Thor was king that he wouldn't listen to Loki—and in fact, being king would probably lead him to think he didn't need to.

He met his mother's eyes and saw there that she wanted to hear what he had to say. She was the only person who ever looked at him like that. So he took a breath and finished, "He's blinded by rage, sometimes. And with the might of the Asgardian throne behind him, I fear what might happen. What if the Jotünns actually revolted against us, instead of just grumbling about Asgard's rule like they have been? He could drag us into a war."

Frigga nodded, but didn't speak, and now that Loki had started, he found that he couldn't stop the flood of words. "I just think he needs more time. Another fifty years, maybe..." But even as he said it, he knew it was absurd. Thor would be crowned and Asgard would be weaker for it. Still, he had to try one last gambit. "Mother," he said, turning to her, "if you spoke to Father, he'd listen to you."

With a sigh, she pressed her lips together and tilted her head, looking sad. "I can't do that."

His brow furrowed and he let out a harsh, hopeless breath. "Why not?"

She looked out towards the water again, turning the stone over and over in her fingers. "Because it isn't my place."

"You're the queen," he said, hearing the ugly, puerile whine in his own voice. "You've ruled as regent while he was in the Odinsleep. Why shouldn't he trust what you say?"

"Loki," she sighed. "It's not a matter of your father trusting what I say."

He dropped his hands to his sides and clenched his fists. "Then what is it? I know you see what I see. You *agree* with me."

For a moment, she didn't speak, and the two of them stood there, a stark tableau against the gray sky. Queen and prince. Mother and son. The two members of the royal family who knew the value of silence, of watching and listening, of learning. The difference was that his mother was content with her place, and Loki didn't even know what his was.

When she turned back to him, she looked up and met his gaze, holding it. "This was your father's decision. I've offered my counsel when he's sought it, and I've guided him as best I could. But in the end, it was his choice to make."

"And what if he's wrong?" Loki asked bitterly.

She didn't answer. But at least she didn't say there was no way Odin could be wrong. He was, though. His father was wrong about Thor being ready. Thor never watched, never listened, because he didn't think it was important to do so. He thought if you weren't fighting, if you weren't moving, constantly *doing*, then something was wrong. And being king was about more than running headlong into battle. Loki understood that—kingship was *about* listening and watching. It was about understanding not just what people wanted, but also what they needed, and about not allowing one's emotions to cloud his judgement.

But that was a dangerous line of thinking, because it sounded too much like Loki, and to suggest that his own traits would make for a better king was to suggest that *he* would be a better king. And nobody believed that, including him. He was too much of an outsider, for whatever reason—his magic, his quietness, his love of learning over fighting. It didn't matter what it was, it simply *was*. But just because Loki didn't want to be king didn't automatically mean that Thor *should* be.

"He won't be a good king," Loki said quietly. "He's not ready."

Frigga looked away, out across the water. Darker clouds were moving in from the edge of the world. Every time the wind blew, the temperature seemed to drop. It might soon be cold enough that they brought snow instead of rain. She looked back towards him. "Loki." Her face was sad. "You said before you didn't know why Thor would possibly need you."

Surprised by this turn in the conversation, he said, "The question still stands." The discussion about Thor's fitness for the throne was clearly over. And truly, he shouldn't have brought it up to begin with. Mother wouldn't do anything but stand behind his father's decision. She wouldn't speak ill of Thor. If she had wanted to intercede, she'd already done so and failed.

Frigga took his hands. "Thor will always need you. More than ever, now that he's taking the throne."

At this, Loki laughed humorlessly. "Is he aware of that?" Before Frigga could say anything, he shook his head. "He doesn't need me. Thor values strength and glory, running people through with swords and bashing heads together. He's got the Warriors Three and the Lady Sif for that. And Asgard's armies, which I'm sure would follow him to the very gates of Hel." With a faint smile, he added, "I've never been much of a head-basher."

Her fingers tightened around his. "Whether or not Thor realizes that he needs you is a different matter."

Loki shook his head. "It's...kind of you, I suppose, Mother. But you don't need to worry so much about my feelings. I know my uses." His fingers clenched, then loosened. "I know my place."

His mother put a hand to his face. Her cool fingers were as comforting now as they'd been when he'd been a child, though he knew he was far too old to want his mother's comfort. "I'm not saying this to be kind, Loki. Thor needs you, just as you need him. You would both do well to remember it. I don't worry about Thor being king because I know he'll have you to help him."

"I don't need Thor," Loki said like a reflex. A terrible lie. That was the trouble—his need for Thor to respect him, love him, the same way he did his friends.

Then, the rest of what she'd said sunk in. She didn't worry because she saw Loki as—what, an equal partner in the kingship? No one else would, but the fact that she did made him feel a small bit of pride. It meant she valued his skills and traits. It meant that if the throne had fallen to him, she'd have had faith in him to be a good king.

“Hm.” Frigga smiled again, this one more resigned than sad, as though she knew how much the foundations of his relationship with Thor had crumbled over the years. Love alone couldn’t prop them up. If the whole edifice collapsed, he was afraid it would take him with it. So maybe he had to find something else to patch the cracks. Or hide them, at the very least, so that he was the only one who knew they existed.

“Come home for dinner,” Frigga said. “I thought we might have something small tonight. Just the four of us, before the big day.”

Loki nodded wordlessly and squeezed her hand before letting it go. He watched as she made her way back along the boulders at the shoreline, then disappeared between ruined buildings that were beginning to fall into the water, the ones that the new houses had been meant to hide. Covering up problems. How Asgardian.

With a sigh, he crossed his arms over his chest. If Thor was looking for him, then he probably needed to go back. Thor doubtless had some kind of ridiculous question, like, *does this ceremonial armor properly accentuate my biceps?* Or maybe, *is my hair flowing enough under my winged helmet?*

That made him snort. Oh, brother. Loki really did love him, despite everything. It was just that his love and jealousy and concern and resentment was all tied up together in a toxic knot that he couldn’t untangle. It shouldn’t have been this way. He hated that it was. But this was the game he’d been forced to play. Deck stacked against him, rigged so that he couldn’t win. So he’d play a different game, one with rules that hadn’t been set up to ensure he lost.

If no one could see what he did about Thor—if they couldn’t see the damage he would cause as king, then he would have to take matters into his own hands. He would *make* them see. His brother would be furious at him for interfering, but Thor would never know. Loki was a talented liar, and Thor was much less talented at detecting those lies.

A skiff flew overhead and he watched its path, his face expressionless. He loved Thor. And it was *because* he loved Thor that he needed to delay this coronation. Hadn’t Mother just said that Thor needed him? Well, Thor needed Loki to protect Asgard from his recklessness.

Loki looked down at his folded arms, thinking. The best way to make everyone see what Thor was—well, it was simply to let Thor be himself, wasn’t it? To create a situation in which Thor couldn’t help but allow his rage to get the better of him, where he would respond recklessly to a slight, an insult, a—

His eyes widening, Loki looked up, staring into the distance but seeing nothing at all except the machinations whirring away in his mind. An insult by a despised foe. An insult that could be seen as an act of war. Loki’s breath hitched for a moment and he smiled. What was more insulting than his brother’s long-awaited coronation getting interrupted and halted? What would enrage him more than those childhood boogeymen, the Frost Giants, sneaking into Asgard and stirring up trouble? There *were* rumblings of discontent from Jotunheim, it was entirely conceivable that such a thing might happen. And Thor would have no qualms about killing monsters. But their father would. Their father thought even monsters deserved peace treaties.

Loki pressed his lips together, his heart beating faster. It would be so easy. All he needed to do was go to Jotunheim via his secret way and find a few Frost Giants stupid and angry enough to break into the palace. As Frost Giants were, as a rule, stupid and angry by nature, and Loki could be very persuasive, that wouldn’t be a problem.

There was still one stone left in his pocket. He pulled it out, hooked his arm back, but then paused.

*Stop playing the game.* After a second, he let the stone fall from his fingers and drop to the ground, where it skittered across the stone floor of the terrace. If he snuck them into the weapons vault, the Destroyer would kill them the minute they touched anything. And he didn't even have to get Thor to *go* to Jotunheim—he only needed him to raise enough of a fuss to prove he wasn't ready for the throne yet. No harm done, except to his brother's pride. Oh, and the dead Frost Giants, he supposed, but what did he care if a few monsters were killed?

He straightened his arms and tilted his head. He'd always wanted to be seen as worthy. Maybe, just maybe, if people saw Thor for who he truly was, then they'd finally see Loki for who *he* truly was. They'd see he could be worthy, too.

He *would* be worthy. And one way or another, he'd prove it.

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